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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE; NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/WATERS

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TAGS: [KWBG](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [IS](#) [KDEM](#)

SUBJECT: WESTERN WALL SYNAGOGUE PROMPTS PALESTINIAN CONCERN

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The al-Aqsa Foundation and Mufti of Jerusalem have publicly criticized the opening of a synagogue located adjacent to the Western Wall Tunnel, close to sensitive Jewish and Muslim holy sites. The Western Wall Heritage Foundation told PolOff that the synagogue is not new, but was recently renovated and rededicated. Separately, Palestinian residents of the Muslim Quarter say there are excavations going on under other Jewish owned properties in the area. End summary.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF NEW SYNAGOGUE
DRAWS CRITICISM FROM MUSLIM LEADERS

¶2. (C) The al-Aqsa Foundation and the Mufti of Jerusalem Muhammad Hussein released separate statements in late September condemning the opening of what they called a new synagogue near al-Aqsa Mosque. The Foundation and the Mufti said excavations undertaken in connection with the synagogue threaten the structural integrity of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The Mufti told PolOff October 2 that the synagogue is part of Israeli efforts to undermine Muslim claims in this area of the Old City.

SYNAGOGUE LOCATED NEAR
MUSLIM AND JEWISH HOLY SITES

¶3. (C) PolOff visited the Getz Synagogue (named after former Rabbi of the Western Wall Meir Yehuda Getz) on October 1 with the Western Wall Heritage Foundation. The synagogue is just outside the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount under the Old City's Muslim Quarter, and Jewish worshippers' only access is through the Western Wall Tunnel system. The synagogue is a narrow room alongside the Tunnel wall, containing two rows of seats and bookshelves.

¶4. (C) The Foundation representative said the synagogue had opened roughly 30 years ago when the Western Wall Tunnel was excavated and that it was renovated this year prior to a September 20 rededication. PolOff compared photos of the synagogue from 2002 with the existing synagogue and observed that the space has not grown. However, seating was added to accommodate up to 30 people, lighting was improved, and a glass floor was put in so visitors can view the Western Wall Tunnel below. PolOff observed no signs of excavations or construction that breach the boundary of the Western Wall.

POSSIBLE EXCAVATIONS IN THE MUSLIM QUARTER

¶5. (C) PolOff met residents of the Muslim Quarter who showed him two buildings where they claim Israelis are carrying out

excavations near the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Jerusalem attorney Danny Seidemann told PolOff these buildings belong to groups such as Ateret Cohanim and El Ad.

¶6. (C) Comment: Activities near the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in the past have drawn publicity and resulted in violent clashes, such as in 1996 when the northern exit of the Western Wall Tunnel was opened and more recently at the Mughrabi Gate ramp. Rumors of such excavations have the potential to increase friction between Jerusalem's religious communities. End comment.

WALLES